

Understanding Media Culture

Jostein Gripsrud

Professor of Media Studies, University of Bergen,
Norway



A member of the Hodder Headline Group

LONDON

Distributed in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press Inc., New York

2002

5 Hermeneutics: interpretation and understanding

The point of view of the audience

In this chapter we will approach the process of communication from an angle that differs slightly from that of semiotics. We will in particular have a look at what happens when we make use of, or appropriate, media offerings according to *hermeneutics*. One might say that this theoretical tradition primarily regards the process of communication from the standpoint of the audience, the readers, viewers and listeners, but it also clearly concerns the process as a whole.

Mass media texts appear to the audience as separated from the sender and her, his or their intentions in a different way than is the case with interpersonal, face-to-face communication. When in a movie theatre, few people will bother or think to ask what the hard-working screenwriter or director in Hollywood may have meant 'at a deeper level' with regard to what we see and hear. The same would apply to most readers of novels. In principle, it also applies to newspaper articles and chat shows on TV. The point is that if we are sitting in a chair or on a sofa getting a 'message' by way of electronic shadows on a screen or whatever, we are relatively 'free' when answering the question 'What does this mean – to us?' The person or persons who address us cannot control that we have understood their utterances in line with their intentions. We don't call up some Hollywood studio to ask what on earth that car chase or heroine's line was supposed to mean, and Shakespeare and Ibsen have both been dead for a very long time so we can't check with them what they intended their plays to 'actually' mean.

The word 'free' is between inverted commas here since we are not, of course, totally free when trying to understand some mass media text or other. On the contrary, we are restricted in lots of ways by our culturally determined

prior knowledge of signs, genres, media and the world at large, before and now. This is one of the absolutely central points in hermeneutic theory. Our *pre-understandings* are necessary prerequisites for our perceptions and understandings of new texts – as well as other phenomena. So, in this perspective, our *pre-judices* are not generally subject to condemnation. If we were totally without them, we would not be able to understand anything.

Hermeneutics and research

Hermeneutics means 'theory of interpretation', and was originally more or less a methodological discipline in forms of scholarship such as theology and law, i.e. scholarship aimed at determining the 'actual' or 'real' meaning of certain texts (the Bible and the law, say). However, hermeneutics also has roots all the way back to antiquity, where hermeneutic questions were integral to epistemological reflection and, more specifically, central to the methodological problems concerning the understanding of old texts that were more or less difficult to comprehend.

At the same time, humankind as a species is constantly busy trying to understand, to find meaning in the things that surround it. When we encounter something incomprehensible, we may get angry or try to invent some sort of meaning to give to it. One of the reasons that death is such a taboo subject in our culture may well be that its meaning has become quite uncertain for people of our day and age. 'Incomprehensible' works of art are probably extremely irritating to people more because they appear incomprehensible than because they are 'ugly' or possibly 'immoral'. Hermeneutics is thus more than a methodological tool for clergymen and lawyers.

At least since Romanticism, it has also been seen as an increasingly plural philosophical tradition, that one may find includes names as diverse as Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor. All of these emphasize different things and may have different opinions on a lot of subjects. But in general, epistemological issues and the theory of science have been central to many of them. The German Wilhelm Dilthey, for instance, introduced the famous distinction between the sciences of *understanding* (the humanities and 'cultural sciences' such as history, psychology, philosophy) and the sciences of *explanation* (the natural sciences). The social sciences have had a hard time deciding which of these categories they belong to – some disciplines and traditions have emphasized interpretation and understanding, others the emulation of the methodological and epistemological principles of the natural sciences. Actually, both the social sciences and the humanities combine the two aims and procedures related to them. Max Weber, for instance, pointed out early

on that sociology 'is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences' (Weber, 1968: 4).

After the Second World War, perhaps the most important of hermeneutic philosophers was Hans-Georg Gadamer, particularly well known for his book *Truth and Method* ([1960] 1975). In it he discusses the conditions for valid historical knowledge and, very influentially, how we actually come to understand texts from other historical periods or situations than our own. Gadamer made the point mentioned above, that interpretation is something that marks humankind as a species, but he is especially interested in how we make sense of, or establish the meaning of, the texts and events of the past. This is where the above-mentioned 'pre-understandings' come in: we can never escape our own historical conditions when interpreting history or texts from the past. We cannot hope to find an answer to what an author such as Shakespeare 'actually meant' by a play. All we can do is to try and establish a meaning through what Gadamer sees as a 'dialogue' with the text in question. The text is seen as an 'answer' to 'questions' we ask on the basis of our own historical (social, cultural) situation – but it may also pose 'questions' we ourselves have to 'answer'. Through the act of interpretation, a fusion takes place between what Gadamer calls the 'horizon' of the text and the 'horizon' of the interpreter – and the result is something new, a new perspective of some sort. The text enriches and changes the interpreter and thus also, to some extent, the world in which the interpreter lives. This, in a sense, implies a form of relativization of the meaning of texts (and, also, historical events), since it will change over time. Gadamer's work and way of thinking formed the basis for the movement in literary theory known as *reception theory*, where the role of the reader in literary history is emphasized, and to which we will shortly return. But, as we shall also see in this chapter, hermeneutic problems and concepts are also central to scholars as diverse as the theorist of science Karl Popper and the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas.

Hermeneutics is, then, about what it means to understand something and how one arrives at an understanding, a meaning, which is also a form of knowledge. Two relatively simple concepts I have already introduced in previous chapters can serve as clues to what a process of interpretation or understanding involves: *text* and *reading*. A text, we have seen, is a 'tissue' of signs with multiple possible meanings, combined in ways that can also add to the potential meanings. Most texts therefore have a greater or lesser degree of *polysemy*, a plurality of significations or meanings. Words and other signs also vary in meaning as time passes, and are differently understood in different societies and cultures. To read, as we pointed out with reference to the etymological meaning of the Latin basis of the German and French word for this activity (*lesen*, *lire*), is to combine different elements to make a (new)

whole. To p
in other wo

We are sei
signifieds, a
they are say

Reading
encounter t
lies our exp
disgusts. Th
course is co
reading, an
hermeneuti
we have w
(*Verstehun*

When we
New York T
texts of a sir
as to what a
look. Such e
we read. Th
appears and
(1974) spea
understandi
Reading is t
the 'horizon
attitudes can
general herr
take turns i
anything fro
textbook ha
give us a clu
asks the read
us with: 'Ho
that life in t
language act
along lines s
as absolutely

The term
designate th
Social scien
(Neither can
where they a

whole. To perceive or appropriate the meaning of a text through reading it is, in other words, an activity, not simply passively 'receiving' finished meanings. We are served with a plurality of signifiers with a plurality of possible signifieds, and we use our acquired knowledge of codes to determine what they are saying (to us).

Reading is thus a process in which meaning is created through the encounter between the elements of the text and the reader's head. In this head lies our experiences, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, unconscious desires and disgusts. The meaning we get out of a novel or required reading in a university course is consequently, in a sense, a mix of elements we brought to the act of reading, and the signs and sign structures we found in the text. Gadamer's hermeneutic term, which covers all of the preconditions and presuppositions we have when trying to understand a text, is horizon of understanding ('Verstehungshorizont').

When we encounter a new text, be it a novel, a film or today's issue of *The New York Times*, we do so on the basis of previous experiences not least with texts of a similar kind. We start reading the newspaper with certain expectations as to what a newspaper is, what it is supposed to contain, and how it should look. Such expectations are decisive for how we perceive and understand what we read. They are also tied to more general expectations as to how the world appears and works. The hermeneutic literary theoretician Hans Robert Jauss (1974) speaks of the horizon of expectations of readers rather than horizons of understanding, but the meaning of the two terms are pretty much similar. Reading is to Jauss a process where the reader's horizon of expectations meets the 'horizon' of the text, i.e. the register of signs, traditions, values, views and attitudes carried by the work or text. This encounter is, as in Gadamer's more general hermeneutics, thought of as a 'dialogue' where the reader and the text take turns in 'asking questions' and 'answering'. Our questions could be anything from 'what will happen to the hero' to 'what does this ridiculous textbook have to do with *my* life', and texts that behave properly will at least give us a clue or two in the direction of an answer. The questions that the text asks the reader may probably best be thought of as various challenges it presents us with: 'How would you have reacted in a similar situation?' 'Do you agree that life in the countryside is really this bad?' 'Does it really make sense that language actually only refers to itself?' The idea that reading is a form of dialogue along lines such as these is a reflection of the general status of the term 'dialogue' as absolutely central to hermeneutical thinking.

The term 'horizon of expectation' is in fact also used by Karl Popper to designate the pre-knowledge and presuppositions of some field or problem. Social scientists cannot, for example, simply go out and observe society. (Neither can journalists, if anyone thinks that they could.) They have to know *where* they are to do their investigations, and *what to look for*. And that which

they look for will have to be understood on the basis of what they already know, and the theoretical assumptions with which they are equipped. One cannot do serious research according to what I once heard referred to as the 'Vasco da Gama method' (i.e. with reference to the Portuguese naval explorer who supposedly did not know where he was going when he set out, did not know where he was when he was there, and did not know where he had been when he returned). Still, there have been research projects that resemble this. And journalism.

This also applies to the sort of research that is the study of texts. One must necessarily know something about the text one studies beforehand (the minimum is knowledge of the elementary meanings of the signs employed), and have some idea of what to look for. It goes for all sorts of research that the *knowledge-interest* that drives one's investigations is, as pointed out by Jürgen Habermas, of fundamental importance to the results one may arrive at and how one does so. Habermas differentiates between three categories of knowledge interests:

- the technical-instrumental one, which underpins the natural sciences
- the hermeneutic one, which he sees as fundamental to interpretative disciplines such as history, social anthropology, literary studies etc.
- and the 'emancipatory' or critical one, which may be said to characterize critical inquiries in the humanities and social sciences aimed at exposing power structures and enabling human freedom.

The latter would also be 'hermeneutic' in our sense here, but a critical hermeneutic that breaks with traditions that a 'mainstream' hermeneutic discipline would tend to respect and further.

For any sort of research it is important that one manages to be open to possible *surprises* in the encounter with some concrete material, whether texts, human actions or whatever one studies. Our horizons of expectations can collide, so to speak, with observations we make in the material. In such cases, the philosopher of science Karl Popper says that the observations may:

have an effect upon our horizon of expectations like a bombshell. This bombshell may force us to reconstruct, or rebuild, our whole horizon of expectations; that is to say, we may have to correct our expectations and fit them together into something like a consistent whole. We can say that in this way our horizon of expectations is raised to and reconstructed on a higher level, and that we reach in this way a new stage in the evolution of our experience; a stage in which those expectations which are not hit by the bomb are somehow incorporated into the horizon, while those parts of the horizon which have suffered damage are repaired and rebuilt.

(Popper, 1979: 345)

This
when
ideas a
Literar
cultur
dream
influe

Karl
theoret
(1971).
finding
field fo
fundam
discove
- physic
such as
influen
analytic
'rebellio
about q
interesti
and anal

The h

But how
proceed?
sentence,
the US fe
without a
say: each
whole. Th
(writing)
this partic
understood
historical
whole. The
form, whi
feminist o
may illust
movement

This way of thinking is completely parallel to that of Hans Robert Jauss when speaking of how literary texts may make readers reconsider both their ideas about literature, and their notions of right and wrong in various fields. Literary texts that can do this may become watersheds in both literary and cultural history. Artists of all sorts – and possibly also quite a few journalists – dream of producing texts or artworks that may have such a life-changing influence on their audiences.

Karl Popper's description above is also closely related to the historical and theoretical arguments of another philosopher of science, Thomas S. Kuhn (1971). He demonstrated that scientific *paradigms*, defined as systems of findings, procedures and theories that regulate research in a given scientific field for some period of time (i.e. a sort of horizon of expectations) can be fundamentally challenged and collapse when certain new, 'groundbreaking' discoveries are made. While Kuhn took his examples from the natural sciences – physics in particular – we may rather think, for instance, of how disciplines such as literary and film studies were changed forever by the structuralist influence in the 1960s; the objects, the questions asked and the common analytical procedures became different. Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of 'rebellions' by heretics or 'heterodox' actors in various social fields are actually about quite parallel processes – both inside and outside of academia. An interesting media-historical research topic could, for instance, be to identify and analyse 'paradigm shifts' within the field of journalism.

The hermeneutic circle

But how does the act of interpretation, the construction of an understanding, proceed? The fundamentals may be exemplified by how we read a single sentence, such as this piece of graffiti (which is actually, I believe, a quote from the US feminist Gloria Steinem): 'A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle'. We understand such a mini-text in several steps, one might say: each word individually, and gradually, cumulatively, the sentence as a whole. The precondition is, of course, that we know the graphic signs (writing) used and understand the language in question, but the whole that this particular sentence makes up, is slightly absurd, and can only be understood if one uses what one has of more general cultural, political and historical prior knowledge to regard the text as part of a larger, contextual whole. The sentence is a sort of a feminist manifesto in a very brief, humorous form, which would have been practically unthinkable before the 'new' feminist or 'women's lib' movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This example may illustrate, then, how our understanding is developed through a movement back and forth between parts and wholes on various levels. One

of what they already
y are equipped. One
ard referred to as the
ague naval explorer
n he set out, did not
w where he had been
ts that resemble this.

ly of texts. One must
lies beforehand (the
the signs employed),
ts of research that the
ointed out by Jürgen
ne may arrive at and
three categories of

e natural sciences
ital to interpretative
ary studies etc.
e said to characterize
es aimed at exposing

here, but a critical
stream' hermeneutic

nages to be open to
aterial, whether texts,
of expectations can
aterial. In such cases,
rvations may:

i bombshell. This
whole horizon of
pectations and fit
can say that in this
ucted on a higher
evolution of our
re not hit by the
those parts of the
ilt.

opper, 1979: 345)

must understand the part in order to understand the whole and the whole in order to understand the part. This principle is called the hermeneutic circle.

It should be quite easy to recognize this from our reading of, say, Agatha Christie-type detective novels. We read the first few chapters and form a preliminary idea of what is going on and who is involved, but the final chapter(s) will, if the novel is any good, make sure that characters and events we thought we had understood early on will have taken on a new and very different meaning. What we regarded as an innocent aside in the novel's second chapter turns out, in light of the novel as a whole, to be an important clue as to who the murderer is. Or, when reading a poem, watching a film or TV drama, enigmatic elements become meaningful only in light of the whole, and the discovery of new meaning in particular elements may influence our perception of the whole.

We do, however, already have some idea about the whole at the outset (cf. the notion of the horizon of expectations), even if this may be more or less thoroughly changed as we read, watch or listen. We might say that this, our idea of the whole, is *projected* from our heads and on to the text; it is continuously used to give meaning to what we read, while we read. A main element here is, of course, our previous experience with this particular sort of text. Our *genre-consciousness* or *knowledge* is, as we pointed out above, a central part of our horizon of expectations. It applies to detective novels as well as newscasts, James Bond movies, textbooks and plays written by Ibsen.

But in our graffiti (slogan) example, we also saw how a real, thorough or 'deeper' understanding of it depended on our placing the whole of the sentence as part of a *larger* whole – a specific historical and social *context*. As we have already seen, context literally means 'with text' (con-text). This is about how the social surroundings of the text resonate in it so that knowledge of these surroundings is often a prerequisite for understanding the text at all – something we touched upon when speaking of the pragmatic aspects of semiotics in the previous chapter. The specific situation in which things are said or communicated is often of decisive importance for a comprehension of the utterance, whatever it may be. But the term 'context' may also refer to more specifically *textual* 'surroundings', i.e. other texts, old or contemporary, that the text refers to or even quotes in some way. Any western film refers to other and previous westerns, and no new poem is written without resonances of previous poetry. The semiotician Julia Kristeva (cf. Chapter 2 of the present volume, on influence) has dubbed this phenomenon *intertextuality*. In her perspective, any given text is part of a gigantic 'total text', where all texts of all times are parts, even if any text will be closer to some other texts than others.

The principles that apply to the process of understanding in reading, do, according to hermeneutics, apply to *any* process of interpretation and understanding. We move within the hermeneutic circle whether we like it or

not, v
today

Her

A lite
situat
is no
(Kitta
specia
we do
when
interp
TV cl
expec
that t
time
think
poet
under
imagi
consc
from
make
forma
every
the us
reality
are ve
terms
studie
the vo

At
totally
when
chara
interp
preco
of the
reflect
source

not, whether we know it or not, when trying to understand something, be it today's newspaper, the media in general, history, society – or ourselves.

Hermeneutic self-reflection

A literary scholar once said that the need for interpretation 'springs from the situation that arises when a reader suddenly realizes that the meaning of a text is not self-evident, does not present itself to an immediate perception' (Kittang, 1977: 19). Obviously, this scholar here thought of interpretation as a specialized, conscious activity, not simply a part of being human, something we do all the time. He was primarily thinking of an experience one might have when reading certain types of literature. A main problem with conscious interpretations of the most typical mass media texts (journalism, advertising, TV chat shows), their functions and meanings, such as media students are expected to make, is that they are so 'commonplace' or 'usual' – i.e. trivial – that they appear easy to understand. We do, of course, interpret them all the time in an elementary sense, but largely in an unconscious way, without thinking about it. With this in mind, I often quote one of my teachers, the poet and professor Georg Johannesen, who once said that 'in order to understand what goes on in a concert hall on a festive occasion one must imagine all participants wearing grass skirts'. One must, in other words, consciously try to distance oneself, take the position of a social anthropologist from some faraway country or an intelligent alien from outer-space. One must *make strange* what appears self-evident (cf. our presentation of the Russian formalists in Chapter 2). We must try to regard the common, trivial, and everyday as something conspicuous. This implies consciously trying to replace the usual, everyday codes or categories with which we routinely understand reality, and instead trying to grasp the meaning of phenomena with which we are very well acquainted by way of *another language* (for example, theoretical terms taken from the vocabularies of the social sciences, linguistics or literary studies). Very many of these are, as this book indicates, brought together in the vocabulary of today's media studies.

At the same time, it is also a central hermeneutic insight that we can never *totally* rid ourselves of our particular historical, social and cultural conditions when trying to understand the meaning of some phenomena. But what characterizes a conscious process of interpretation is not least that the interpreter reflects on her- or himself, and her/his presuppositions and preconditions, in order to lift these out of the more or less unconscious dregs of the so-called self-evident. This is what is known as *hermeneutic self-reflection*. In this concept lies an idea of conscious interpretative activity as a source of increased self-awareness, improved understanding of oneself –

personal growth, if you like. As we shall see, this makes possible a view of studies and research that goes beyond cramming for exams and having a white-collar job.

That such self-reflection is *demand*ed, i.e. seen as an inescapable ingredient, places a hermeneutic approach in opposition to other ideas as to what scientific or scholarly knowledge *is*, and how it is produced. Such an opposition is clearly relevant to internal tensions within the field of media and communication studies. But it also applies to all other disciplines or fields within the humanities and the social sciences. It was not least this sort of thing that the struggle over positivism was about (cf. Chapter 2). But the insights of hermeneutics concerning the importance of the preconditions for our knowledge of both texts and all other phenomena also pose questions regarding the truth or *validity* of interpretations. We will return to this once I have presented an example of an interpretation.

Foreign man does the best he can: interpreting the first three pages of the *Mirror*

In late June 2000 I took the ferry from Bergen, Norway, across the North Sea to Newcastle, England. While preparing the English-language edition of this book, I wanted to stay for a few weeks in an English language and media environment. Naturally, I started to work as soon as I got on board the boat. That is, I looked for British newspapers. What I found was the tabloid daily the *Mirror*, the issue from 28 June. I thought it looked interesting, and not only because I know that it has a very large circulation. I can read English pretty well, and know the country from many, many visits of up to a month in length, going back to my first, way back in 1968. My elementary knowledge of relevant codes, then, should be OK.

The front page of the *Mirror* had the actress Liz Hurley in a very skimpy outfit spread all over the middle section; she had a giant snake coming up from between her legs, headed for her mouth, from which her tongue was sticking out towards it. Above the picture was a small portrait of Hugh Grant, her ex-boyfriend, and a quote: 'Leaving Hugh was like amputating my left arm ... but I just had to do it'. The picture of Liz and the snake had the following caption: 'SSSEXY: Liz, who today tells of her love-rift pain, pictured in *Talk* magazine. Picture: ELLEN VON UNWERTH'. Underneath the picture, in bright-yellow capital letters on a dark-blue background: 'LIZ HURLEY OPENS HER HEART', and in smaller, white capital letters: 'PAGE 12 & 13'. The lower fifth or so of the page had 'BLAIR'S NEGATIVE POLL SHOCK' in thick capital letters, plus a very brief introduction to this story, marked 'EXCLUSIVE' in white letters on red background, by the paper's political editor.

The 1
unabash
sex, and
since it i
all about
paper is
beneath
entertain
(see Cha
the coup
aspects o
western
citizens,
develop
pretty ge
newspap
lurid sor
journalis
paper for

What i
that it wa
outfit. Ne
photograp

The pi
psychoan
symbolisr
simply the
while also
that the li
jokes. The
text it co
unintende
voyeurism
insatiable,
verbal text
all about i
reprinted
sexy with
semiotics o
involving
of why this
front page.

possible a view of
arms and having a

capable ingredient,
ideas as to what
roduced. Such an
field of media and
disciplines or fields
st this sort of thing

But the insights of
onditions for our
so pose questions
eturn to this once I

erpreting

ross the North Sea
age edition of this
nguage and media
on board the boat.
as the tabloid daily
interesting, and not
I can read English
of up to a month in
ntary knowledge of

y in a very skimpy
ke coming up from
ongue was sticking
ugh Grant, her ex-
; my left arm ... but
e following caption:
d in *Talk* magazine.
re, in bright-yellow
LEY OPENS HER
13'. The lower fifth
CK' in thick capital
d 'EXCLUSIVE' in
litor.

The *Mirror* thus presents itself to potential buyers at a news-stand as an unabashed tabloid, giving the top 80 per cent of its first page to celebrities and sex, and the bottom 20 per cent to politics. The bottom section is important, since it indicates that this is not a US supermarket tabloid of the sort that are all about aliens and spottings of Elvis, and grannies having great sex at 97. This paper is somewhat schizophrenic; it has a political agenda alongside (or beneath) the first priority, which obviously is to provide journalistic entertainment. The Liz Hurley story is, since today's public sphere is what it is (see Chapter 8, on the public sphere), a journalistic 'background' story since the couple that split up are celebrities and so their relationship (and certain aspects of their sex life) have been well known to the public all over the western world. But it is hardly the sort of story that is central to readers as *citizens*, i.e. as members of society able and willing to influence its development. The two parts of the front page together may actually provide a pretty good impression of the whole paper: a large-circulation popular newspaper with 80 per cent emphasis on entertainment (often of a somewhat lurid sort), and 20 per cent on politics and other more or less honourable journalistic subjects. It is a paper for consumers of entertainment more than a paper for politically interested and active citizens.

What intrigued me about the presentation of the Liz Hurley story was not that it was on the front page, and not even that Liz was presented in a revealing outfit. Neither of these things is unusual. It was rather the specifics of this photograph plus its relation to the verbal text that struck me as special.

The picture appears highly sexual to anyone who knows anything about psychoanalysis, or nothing about psychoanalysis but something about visual symbolism in general. The snake is, obviously, a symbol of the phallus, here simply the penis, if you like. Liz is on her back, with the snake between her legs while also seemingly preparing to lick its head. The photograph is so explicit that the line 'LIZ OPENS HER HEART' might easily trigger a variety of vulgar jokes. These responses would be examples of *the image anchoring the verbal text it comes with*, in that they point to a possibility of (intended or unintended) irony in the verbal text. Since (perhaps) most people's general voyeurism and curiosity about the sex life of celebrities seem almost insatiable, such an interpretation of the relation between the picture and the verbal text would work as an encouragement to buy the paper in order to 'read all about it' inside. It is more reasonable to believe that the picture has been reprinted from *Talk* magazine as an eye-catcher simply since it is so explicitly sexy without baring any forbidden body parts (cf. the previous chapter, on semiotics on how 'pornography' is coded as sexually explicit representations involving *naked* people). The photo is perhaps even (part of) an explanation of why this particular (actually old) story made it all the way to the top of the front page.

Having examined this front-page presentation of the Liz Hurley story, one might ask what it means as a whole in relation to, for instance, gender politics. The key element here is again the photograph. It is obviously used to sell the paper, i.e. a picture of a half-naked woman's body is exploited for commercial purposes. This could by some be seen as demeaning, as an insult to women in general. On the other hand, the photographer is evidently a woman, and even if Liz is on her back she may also seem to be in control. There is even a metallic-like texture to the upper garment that is reminiscent of snakeskin, and the colours and patterns are not very dissimilar to those of the snake. So Liz may be in control of the situation, i.e. a strong woman enjoying imaginative sex in a luxurious setting (her clothes, the pool above/behind her). What's wrong with that? Moreover, Liz Hurley is a celebrity who lives off her celebrity status and looks, and worked as an extremely well-paid model for a certain brand of cosmetics for years. This sort of press coverage is more likely to boost than break her career. Is this good or bad? The answer would depend on your moral and/or political values, beliefs and principles. You might even have to think twice – do a bit of hermeneutic self-reflection.

For my own part, I was not at all morally outraged or anything like that. But it was, on the other hand, clear to me that this paper doesn't give first priority to socially and politically relevant news, information and comments, and does not have a feminist bias in its editorial. Whichever way you look at the front page, it's another example of the ubiquitous use of younger women's bodies as representations of sexuality for the sole purpose of selling any number of commodities. If not directly misogynist, such a practice is not particularly helpful for the long-term project of altering centuries of ultimately repressive images or conceptions, or signifieds, of the term 'women'.

Turning the page, then, I found a page 2 where 80 per cent (four columns) was filled with (brief) political items, while the remaining 20 per cent (the far-left column) had an overview of the contents of that day's paper plus a weather report. Not bad, I thought, blending a bit of serious stuff in here may mean it reaches readers who will not be spending an hour or more on the likes of the *Guardian*, the *Independent* or the *Financial Times*. I did not feel a need for any interpretative work on this page, even though it might well have been rewarding.

Such a need arose, however, when I turned my head to look at page 3. It largely consisted of portraits of two blonde women with sunglasses. The title at the top of the page is: 'They could pass as twins but Bo has 16 years on Geri'. The two pictures share this caption: 'SISTER ACT: Bo Derek and Geri Halliwell almost pass as twins as they walk through Heathrow yesterday'. Then follows a subheading in capital letters: 'FILM BEAUTY IS STILL A PERFECT 10'. This is, of course, an intertextual reference to the only film Bo Derek is generally known for, *10*, starring Dudley Moore and directed by her

late husband when she has his experience.

The two women, forwards features tinted sun about as dark-blond hair (they also different), looks. The relevant as very different might say resemblance and mascara what about the above- Dudley Moore would have platform shoes the main highlight.

The whole 'story' out pass through the two, which included), that Bo Derek Turner'. But more'. The actually said explicit, and published elsewhere.

This page example of the realization of the literary and the – and explain

Liz Hurley story, one
ance, gender politics.
ously used to sell the
oited for commercial
n insult to women in
y a woman, and even
rol. There is even a
iscent of snakeskin,
nose of the snake. So
ig woman enjoying
pool above/behind
celebrity who lives off
well-paid model for
ss coverage is more
? The answer would
and principles. You
self-reflection.

anything like that. But
n't give first priority
omments, and does
ou look at the front
r women's bodies as
ing any number of
e is not particularly
ultimately repressive

cent (four columns)
20 per cent (the far-
day's paper plus a
us stuff in here may
or more on the likes
I did not feel a need
ight well have been

o look at page 3. It
sunglasses. The title
as 16 years on Geri'.
o Derek and Geri
eathrow yesterday'.
AUTY IS STILL A
to the only film Bo
and directed by her

late husband John Derek in 1979. A circular-shaped still of Ms Derek from when she was 24 is placed next to the text that the journalist has written after his experience at Heathrow airport.

The two portraits are straightforward, flashlight snapshots of the two women, from their chests up. They are both blonde, with long hair hanging forwards over their left shoulders, and both wear sunglasses. Those are the features they share. That the reporter claims they had 'almost-matching blue-tinted sunglasses' makes a reader worry about his eyesight: The sunglasses are about as different as they can get in material and shape, and while Bo's may be very dark-blue tinted, Geri's are clearly purple. In fact, other than the long blonde hair hanging in a particular way and the fact that both wore sunglasses (they also wore necklaces, not mentioned for some reason – also very different), the two women are about as different as women can be in terms of looks. Their clothes are very different, something that would be just as relevant as their wearing sunglasses. More importantly, their faces are clearly very differently shaped. Bo's is rather long, while Geri's is rather round. Some might say that Bo looks stylish while Geri looks cute. There is no family-like resemblance at all. Geri appears more heavily made up than Bo (more lip gloss and mascara), something that to some would connote a class difference. And what about their heights? These are not mentioned, but anyone who has seen the above-mentioned film will remember how Bo Derek towered over little Dudley Moore even when barefoot, while one suspects that Geri Halliwell would have been closer to Mr Moore in height once she kicked off her old platform shoes. No wonder, then, that the caption moderates the phrasing in the main heading: The two could here '*almost* pass as twins'.

The whole 'twin' idea is thus, of course, nothing but an attempt to create a 'story' out of two observations of female celebrities at an airport celebrities pass through more or less every day. The text is simply a rehash of trivia about the two, which is well known to any reader of the popular press (magazines included), with the possible exception of the information towards the end, that Bo Derek has been 'linked to Jane Fonda's estranged husband Ted Turner'. But, the story says, she 'insists they are long-time friends and nothing more'. The final sentences are marked as quotes, and it may appear as if Derek actually said these words to the reporter at Heathrow. But this is not made explicit, and so they could just as easily have been taken from an interview published elsewhere.

This page seemed to me, in parts and as a whole, simply such a striking example of tabloid journalism that 'a need for interpretation sprang from the realization that the meaning of the text was not self-evident', to paraphrase the literary scholar Kittang, quoted above. The page, once one has stopped to read it and then started wondering about it, more or less asks to be interpreted – and explained – as a text and as a journalistic phenomenon.

First, one may notice how the whole piece revolves around these women's looks, related to age, and ends up with their *love life* or lack of one. There is nothing here about Derek's acting after 1979, and that film was all about her looks. There is nothing about Halliwell's current career as a singer. The piece is thus another contribution to the upholding of an actually very old-fashioned and more or less one-dimensional image of women's lives and purposes. It refers to the frenzied discourses elsewhere in the media world about the need, especially for women, to preserve youthful looks forever, and it continues also the connected idea that a husband is the absolutely central thing women actually need. This page is a far cry from the graffiti slogan 'A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle'. From a feminist point of view, its underlying system of values is ideologically reactionary.

Second, it is obvious that the reason why articles such as this are prominently placed in one of the UK's best-selling newspapers, is to sell papers by entertaining readers with celebrity gossip. But as I have just pointed out, there is nothing new in this story, no saucy rumours or anything like that to spice up the lives of ordinary voyeurs. Moreover, and more important, *the 'twin' idea will appear unfounded to anyone who actually studies the photos and reads the text properly.*

So, the conclusion to my interpretation of these first three pages of this issue of the *Mirror* is that this seems to be a newspaper that, at least in terms of gender politics, is clearly reactionary and assumes that its readers prefer undemanding journalism. In order to find out if this is really a fitting description of the paper, I would have to perform similar interpretations of several whole editions to see if there is a match between the part I have dealt with here and the paper as a whole. One would not necessarily need to examine very many editions to reach a conclusion that would be valid: newspapers are quite stable in their chosen formats or styles and political tendencies from day to day and year to year.

Such a conclusion would not and could not be accepted as the absolute, objective truth, but it would be *arguable*, and if my interpretation above was confirmed as representative, it might be hard to refute it for those who would like to do so. Hermeneutic knowledge is not the same sort of knowledge as that which goes into the construction of bridges (even if there is a lot more hermeneutics there than is normally conceded by engineers and natural scientists). It is always *inviting discussion, dialogue.*

I would, for instance, not try to eliminate the influence on my interpretation exerted by my professional pre-knowledge of how commercial media work, the role of my political leanings in the 'horizon of expectations' with which I encountered this particular newspaper issue. It is also possible that my Scandinavian, specifically my Norwegian background had something to do with my results, as well as my being male. Such afterthoughts are

exan
inter
or fo
rathe
some
ideal
Only
inter,
analy
analy
be le
inter
deme
mate

Or
stude
totall
was r
deal
resea
profil
that t
proba

It v
to the
medi
offici
avera
gover
times
leave
'quali
2.4 m
circul
popul

Litt
conce
I first
of nat
maga
smalle
News

around these women's or lack of one. There is a film was all about her as a singer. The piece is an actually very old-of women's lives and are in the media world of hful looks forever, and is the absolutely central in the graffiti slogan 'A From a feminist point reactionary.

cles such as this are newspapers, is to sell it as I have just pointed out or anything like that and more important, *the* *by studies the photos and*

first three pages of this or that, at least in terms that its readers prefer this is really a fitting nilar interpretations of en the part I have dealt ot necessarily need to that would be valid: or styles and political

cepted as the absolute, interpretation above was it for those who would ie sort of knowledge as n if there is a lot more engineers and natural

the influence on my dge of how commercial orizon of expectations' issue. It is also possible ground had something Such afterthoughts are

examples of a hermeneutic self-reflection, and such reflection is part of the interpretative work. While the traditional positivist ideal is to try to eliminate or forget about the specificities of the researcher, the hermeneutic practice is rather to include and discuss them in the course of the analysis and even sometimes in the eventual presentation of the interpretative analysis. The ideal is not, then, to write whole essays on oneself based on introspection. Only the clearly relevant factors are worth mentioning, and *the validity of the interpretation always rests solely on the evidence taken from the text or object analysed*. An allegation of misogyny is not more valid if the interpretation or analysis leading to it is done by a woman. Likewise the interpretation cannot be legitimately refuted by pointing to the sex, personal history etc. of the interpreter, but only by pointing out weaknesses in the argument itself, demonstrating that, in some way, it is not in keeping with the nature of the material, text or object.

On the other hand, the response could be *so what?* After radical German students in 1968 had worked for a long time on a very critical analysis of the totally dominant German tabloid *Bild Zeitung*, they concluded that the paper was reactionary through and through in every possible way. This was not a big deal to the newspaper's editors – they knew this already, since their market research had for a long time revealed that it was precisely the reactionary profile of the paper that sold several million copies of it every day. I suspect that the *Mirror* would respond likewise to a similar analysis: its editors most probably know what they are doing.

It would be tempting now to say a few words about how the *Mirror* relates to the greater whole of the British press, the even greater whole of the British media system, and then to the whole of British society where, according to official data, 'the number of people living in households on less than half average income rose from 16.9 per cent to 17.7 per cent [in the Blair government's first two years in office], as the incomes of the rich grew three times as rapidly as those of the poor' (the *Guardian*, 14 July 2000). But I will leave that to others. Except for mentioning that the largest-selling so-called 'quality' newspaper, the semi-tabloid *Daily Mail*, has a circulation of almost 2.4 million copies, while my own British favourite paper, the *Guardian*, has a circulation of just below 400,000 per day (*Daily Mail*, 17 July 2000) in a population of 58 million.

Little wonder, then, that many of my British friends and colleagues are so concerned with the quality of British broadcasting, I thought to myself when I first saw these figures. But actually, I was later informed, the per capita sales of national newspapers in the UK are among the highest in the world. 'The magazine market and the market for regional newspapers are correspondingly smaller,' a friend and colleague told me. 'We don't have the equivalents of the *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Paris Match*, or *Der Spiegel* type of weeklies. This is to say

that newspapers in Britain have a particular structural position in the popular reading market, spreading far wider and covering more different interests than in most other countries. Circulation x 4 = readership is the formula used.' I stood corrected, reminded once again that factual knowledge is a prerequisite for correct interpretation.

Interpretative strategies

I have in the above example actually employed what the French hermeneutician Paul Ricoeur has called a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. This term refers to types of interpretation that are oriented towards latent meanings that a text conveys 'underneath' its manifest plane — a critical interpretative strategy that is characteristic of, for example, theoretical traditions such as psychoanalysis and Marxism. It presupposes as a rule that those who speak, write or produce various types of text are not always (or maybe, perhaps, not as a rule) fully aware of what the text they form actually carries in terms of meaning. In this sort of thinking it is assumed that 'society', 'the dominating ideology of femininity', 'the worldview of the West' or 'the unconscious' will be expressed in the text, with the author, the journalist or the film-maker as a more or less unwitting mediator.

Consequently, such a form of understanding may not only be called critical, but also (and perhaps more precisely) *symptomatic*. The text is a manifest symptom of some latent condition (cf. the previous chapter, on semiotics), often some form of conflict or 'disease'. In this tradition, the criteria for truth or validity of an interpretation is that it is internally coherent, that it covers the structures of the text and that it is in keeping with certain theoretical assumptions concerning the conditions of language, psyche or society to which the text is supposed to relate. Both textual and extra-textual matters are, as a rule, understood on the basis of theoretical traditions that are rarely questioned in a particular textual analysis. Theories are instead treated as tools in the interpretative work, as 'keys' that can be used to 'unlock' the 'closed' dimensions of the text. This may be a problem if it means one overlooks or violates the *individual specificity* of a particular text and its possible potential to critically illuminate the preconditions or unquestioned assumptions of the interpreter.

In contrast to this symptomatic interpretative strategy or reading, the *sympathetic* form of reading can be called a 'positive' or *confirmative* interpretative strategy. It aims to discover, as loyally as possible, what can be assumed to be the original intention of the producer of the text, or, possibly, to demonstrate how the text in question can be placed within a particular, more or less valued tradition. These two ambitions often go together very well in the traditional writing of film, art or literary history. Here the author, and

not 's
the te
i.e. try
identif
'eradic
identif
text.

The
practic
the te:
cohere
as a co
toward
and co
called
the 19
status
this wa
Roman
Chapte
words,
regard
A ques
only to
themse
always
newsre

The
the tra
in keep
express
express
cause o
theory
with a
author-
certain
human

A thi
here se
concret
central

not 'society', 'ideology', 'language' or 'the unconscious', is the originator of the text. The interpreter should therefore try to read the text *sympathetically*, i.e. try to place him/herself in the position of the author and thereby try to identify an intended meaning. The interpreter is as far as possible to 'eradicate' him/herself and his/her particular preconditions and instead identify with the author when deciding and presenting the meaning of the text.

The sympathetic interpretative strategy is thus a form of reading that, in practice, centres on *the individual*. It is the subject that actually puts together the text that in a way constitutes and guarantees its presumed unity and coherence. Because one in this sort of thinking principally regards the *subject* as a coherent and unified entity (cf. Chapter 1), one also tends to be oriented towards the unity and coherence of the text – much less towards glitches, gaps and contradictions in it. In film studies this sort of approach to film texts is called *auteurism*, after *auteur*, the French word for 'author', a term used from the 1950s onwards to designate film directors in order to award them the status of Individual Artist behind the collective product a film actually is. In this way film could be elevated to the same status as the other arts that, since Romanticism, have officially been produced by creative 'geniuses' (see Chapter 10 of the present volume, on production). *Auteurism* is, in other words, a sympathetic approach to film analysis and film criticism, which regards the director as the creative subject that expresses him/herself in films. A question to think about: why has it become customary for journalists not only to sign their contributions to papers, but often also to add a picture of themselves next to their names (in the same way that TV news reporters always repeat their names, which have already been mentioned by the newsroom, at the end of their segments in newscasts)?

The criterion for whether an interpretation is valid or not is, according to the tradition of sympathetic interpretation or reading, that it can be said to be in keeping with the *intention of the originator*, the more or less conscious expressive will behind the text. The text is, in other words, seen as having an *expressive* relationship to the creator-subject or, in more positivist terms, the *cause* of the text is the originator or author. One will still find that textual theory and analytical interpretation of this sort often operates, in practice, with a notion of the 'I' behind a text that is different from the empirical author-person. A great poet, director or painter is as a *genius* precisely in a certain sense larger than him/herself, s/he is in some way *representative* of humankind or at least certain parts of it.

A third interpretative strategy or form of reading is *objectifying*. The text is here seen as an autonomous or independent entity, whose relation to a concrete, creative human being is more or less irrelevant. Two things are central to different varieties of this approach: the text's relations to its

predecessors in its particular textual tradition on the one hand and, on the other, the text's internal relations or structures. The latter focus is most typical of the literary criticism that in the 1940s and 1950s was termed *new criticism*, and it is due to this focus that the objectifying interpretative strategy developed very thorough *close readings* of literary works. In the objectifying form of reading, it is the *coherence* of the interpretation and its degree of correspondence with the (presumed) coherence of the text that is the decisive criterion of validity.

The techniques of *close reading* were in many ways taken over and carried on in the structuralist and semiotic approach where, however, the analytical terms were marked by the insights of the theory of signs. Purely 'objectifying' readings of poetry were, for instance, produced by leading structuralist theoreticians such as Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, sometimes working together. These two gentlemen at one time compared the meaning of a poem with a crystal that appears only when the dross that covers it is chipped away (Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss [1962] 1971). It was on the basis of such thought that the fictional professor of literature Morris Zapp in David Lodge's novel *Small World* had fantasies of textual interpretation as *strip mining*. One pushes soil aside with a bulldozer, and thereby exposes the golden ore below – the indisputable, absolute Meaning of the text. Zapp did for a while envisage himself doing something like this to the collected works of Jane Austen, so that he could have the pleasure of putting a number of colleagues out of work because the meaning of all of these texts had been determined once and for all. But semiotic close readings have more often been conducted with ambitions characteristic of the symptomatic interpretative strategy, thus in many ways opening up the text to the world around it.

Debates over these various strategies of interpretation or forms of reading and their criteria of validity have often been quite intense since they are tied to various more general political or philosophical ways of thinking and values. The foundation of the sympathetic form of reading in ideas of the genius, the creative, coherent subject, breaks with understandings of society, psyche and language that emphasize our shared inheritance in these areas, together with the gaps, differences and conflicts within and between them. The objectifying way of reading implies that texts, and particularly those categorized as art, live their lives in isolation from social life in general. According to some, this invites, as does the sympathetic approach, an elitist and more or less asocial (and thus im- or a-moral) understanding of what art and the production of texts are about – namely various forms of communication between people.

A more reasonable position is probably an *eclectic* one: that there is something correct in all the three approaches and the assumptions on which they are founded. The emphasis may shift from one strategy of interpretation to another according to the sort of text we are faced with and what we decide

the
of
co
soc
esc
in
ma
bee
'ob
hei
pro
hav

Me
un

A g
from
con:
with
pers
illus
we,
that
impe
look
'sup
fictic
M
arose
indic
acco
Swed
in hi
engag
writte
foun
centr
under
and v
contr

the purpose of our interpretative work to be in a particular instance. It is not, of course, insignificant to a text's signifiers and signifieds who or which concrete human beings produced it, where and when. It is similarly clear that social, semiotic and psychological dimensions of textual production exceed or escape the conscious control of individuals. It is finally obvious, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, that we as audiences encounter the texts of mass media in isolation from their producers, who for that matter might have been dead for hundreds of years. We are then obliged to perform some sort of 'objectifying' reading, which in fact also has the advantage that it demands heightened attention to what the text actually contains – no matter what the producer of it may originally have intended, and no matter what we might have expected beforehand.

Melodrama as a genre and as a form of understanding

A genre can be seen as a code (see the previous chapter, on semiotics). But from a hermeneutic point of view it is important that a particular genre also constitutes a perspective, a way of understanding the world and our existence within it. Different genres will focus on different dimensions of social and personal life. A brief introduction to theories on the genre of *melodrama* may illustrate this. As we shall see, melodrama has been said to be related to what we, above, called the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, i.e. a form of understanding that distinguishes between a manifest surface and something (more important) that is latent, underlying. An important reason for having a closer look at this is moreover that melodrama is an extremely important 'supergenre' in all media: a large number of media genres, both factual and fictional, may be said to have melodrama as a shared basis.

Melodrama was originally the name of a particular theatrical genre that arose quite precisely in the year 1800 in the commercial theatres of Paris. As indicated by the Greek prefix *melo-*, the term referred to a type of play that was accompanied by music, and that included song and dance numbers. The Swedish historian of theatre and film Rune Waldecranz described melodrama in his 1976 book *Så föddes filmen* (*How Film was Born*) as 'an emotionally engaging tragedy with a happy end'. Waldecranz had actually read all the plays written by Pixérécourt, the man who first formed and named the genre, and found that all (and they were many!) had certain features in common. Most central among these were that all the plays were based on a bourgeois, puritan understanding of morality, and told a story of the struggle between innocence and virtue on the one hand, and immorality and evil on the other. The contrast between the light and bright Good on the one hand and the darkness

of Evil on the other was also very much emphasized in the stage decor, lighting and, not least, in the music and an 'exaggerated' style of acting. Every play also had to have at least one dramatic scene with thunder and lightning, flooding, an avalanche or the like, most often in connection with the final, dramatic battle with the evil villain.

The melodrama genre thus often demanded an elaborate stage machinery. It was not easy to create realistic illusions of thunder, lightning and earthquakes in times that had no electricity. Experiments were also performed with shifts between simultaneously ongoing scenes in ways that prefigured the editing techniques of film. Much about the melodrama prefigured the medium of film and its most typical narratives – which should be obvious from this description. Movie theatres also in many ways took over the functions and audiences of the melodrama theatres when they emerged in the early twentieth century (cf. the aforementioned title of Waldecranz's book). At that time, however, the sociocultural status of melodrama had sunk to a definite low. With the advent in the second half of the nineteenth century of realist and naturalist drama, the heavily emotional melodrama with its stereotypical characters and weightily underlined conflicts had become something 'vulgar' and 'feminine' to the upper classes who frequented the better theatres.

Not surprisingly, then, film – and later television – scholars have been particularly interested in melodrama and its development. As early as 1972, Thomas Elsaesser published an article in which he proposed an entirely new interpretation of this area. He regarded melodrama as an *expressionist* genre, in the sense that it was oriented towards uncovering some forces, conflicts and relations that were imagined to be 'under the surface' of characters and the(ir) world (Elsaesser, 1986). This is also an important idea in a book by the literary scholar Peter Brooks from 1976 (reprinted in 1984), entitled *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Brooks – who seems never to have read Elsaesser – argued that melodrama was more than a genre, it was a 'meaning-making machinery', a way in which to understand the world, which is closely tied to the conditions of modern society. Before the French Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century, everything had in principle been understandable since everything in the last instance was part of one and the same divine order. But following the Renaissance, a new perception of the world had gradually been established, in which God had, so to speak, retired to His Heaven. The French Revolution in a sense completed this process. Now nothing was absolutely certain; everything was up for debate in a 'humanized' world, from political matters and natural phenomena to interpersonal relations and morality. This made for a deep feeling of uncertainty and insecurity and, according to Brooks, melodrama offered valuable existential assistance in this situation. The 'message' of every melodrama is that *underneath the surface of existence*

there
relate.
clearly
incarn
realisti
sceptic
more t
immed
as Dos
context
the 'exp
hidden
(i.e. a f
Melodr
us be co
of realit
Such
historica
formed
distincti
Jekyll an
1, has th
monster
a contest
understan
longer or
one. Psyc
Father, th
stage inca
genre is n
are about
family or
oriented t
clear from
interpretat
see melodr
taking on
One can a
movies of t
other than
Melodra
equally str

the stage decor, lighting effects. Every play also had lightning, flooding, and the final, dramatic

rate stage machinery. Under, lightning and were also performed by that prefigured the drama prefigured the which should be obvious ways took over the as they emerged in the (Waldecraz's book). drama had sunk to a nineteenth century of melodrama with its conflicts had become who frequented the

- scholars have been ent. As early as 1972, posed an entirely new in expressionist genre, e forces, conflicts and characters and the (ir) a book by the literary (1984), entitled *The* have read Elsaesser as a 'meaning-making' which is closely tied to the ion, at the end of the understandable since me divine order. But d had gradually been s Heaven. The French thing was absolutely world, from political ns and morality. This y and, according to nce in this situation he surface of existence

there is a universe of strong moral forces and laws to which we must learn to relate. Every single melodrama would try to present these moral forces as clearly as possible in a concrete, personalized form. The characters were incarnations of moral principles (e.g. good or evil), not psychologically realistic figures. Brooks ties the 'melodramatic imagination' to a widespread scepticism towards the 'surface' of things, a general idea that the more real, the more true and important factors are located 'behind' or 'beneath' what we immediately see or hear (or smell etc.). Thus he argues that great authors such as Dostoyevsky and even Kafka are 'melodramatic' in various ways. In our context, however, it is probably more important that he demonstrates how the 'expressionism' of melodrama, its emphasis on laying bare that which is hidden or latent, ties it to the hermeneutics of suspicion I talked about above (i.e. a form of understanding represented by Marx, Freud and many others). Melodrama wants to present the latent in a direct, concrete way so as not to let us be confused by the manifest, the apparent, the more or less chaotic surface of reality.

Such a view also makes it possible to understand some of melodrama's historical development. The modern psychological understanding that was formed during the latter half of the nineteenth century was based on a parallel distinction between a latent and a manifest plane in the human psyche. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, which I mentioned in Chapter 1, has this distinction already in its title – the decent doctor had a terrible monster inside him. Sigmund Freud later proposed, as I have also mentioned, a contested but, over time, widely accepted scientific version of the same basic understanding. The melodrama genre followed this development by no longer only presenting an underlying moral universe, but also a psychological one. Psychological entities or figures – such as the Evil Father, the Good Father, the Good Mother, the Evil Mother etc. – could now also appear on stage incarnated in the form of quite 'flat' fictional characters. The melodrama genre is now often seen as identical with the *family melodrama*, i.e. texts that are about the intimate and conflict-ridden relations between people in a family or couple, between parents and children – often traditionally women-oriented texts. The family ties between melodrama and soap opera should be clear from this. But if one bears in mind the history of melodrama and the interpretation of the genre as a particular kind of 'imagination', one can easily see melodramatic features in genres such as westerns (baddies in black clothes making on clean-shaven goodies in white; bad ranchers against good farmers). One can also easily spot elements of melodrama in crime fiction, not least movies of the *film noir* category. The same goes for most American TV fiction, other than comedies.

Melodrama has always been about strong emotions and has appealed equally strongly to the emotional involvement of the audience. From Peter

Brooks' point of view the audience's identification and involvement is to be regarded as a sort of pedagogical aid or tool – the point is to teach the audience a lesson about the basic, underlying forces and rules. Even if the stylization or simplification of characters and conflicts has been important, the ambition to create identificatory involvement in the narratives has always also led to an emphasis on realist credibility in the form of presentation. Characters in film melodrama have, at least since the 1930s, normally had a degree of complexity – for example, by having a conflict between two principles built into them, such as the tough guy with a soft centre – a Humphrey Bogart speciality. (Typically, this may be explicitly pointed out, as in *Casablanca* where the police chief says to our man: 'Underneath that hard, cynical shell you're at heart a sentimentalist'.) The borders to psychologically realist drama are consequently fleeting, and have been so at least since Henrik Ibsen, say, made use of melodramatic elements in his plays.

So it is not surprising that factual genres are also marked by melodrama. The material from 'real life' must also be formed in some way by journalists and documentary film-makers. They will, then, often employ simplified constructions or models of conflict; they may want a strong emotional appeal etc. – devices that belong to the melodramatic 'supergenre'. This is clear in the use of photography in the popular press, with its emphasis on intensely emotional close-ups, simple visual symbolism etc. Journalism is, in general, geared towards concrete presentations of social structures and forces that are actually quite abstract. The simplest approach is then to personalize them, tie them to the actions and appearances of individuals. Thus it also becomes possible to morally judge the people in question; they can be divided into good guys and bad guys. Such a melodramatic perception of the world can also be used by the actors in global politics to legitimate their actions. In American foreign policy, for instance, it seems that the USA is strikingly often called upon to take on Pure Evil; a similar sharply polarized worldview is also a trademark of certain states and political movements elsewhere.

Melodrama and its form of understanding may work well as long as it is about presenting fundamental moral and psychological principles. But it is problematic when real, complex social conditions are presented in the same form. Society at large, nationally as well as globally, is governed more by anonymous, abstract social forces (such as the laws of capitalism) than by individuals and their moral characters; and it can rarely be understood in an adequate way if one only distinguishes sharply between the all-good and the all-bad. The melodramatic understanding can, in a journalistic context, often be considered a misunderstanding.

Hermeneutics as a critical perspective

If communication is about production of meaning, then the hermeneutic perspectives I have outlined so far in this chapter must be central to all studies of media and communication, from the bottom up. One main point is the same as for the semiotic approach – the relatively simple and well-ordered models of communication are ‘exploded’. They are opened up to a surrounding ocean of history, society and culture, and this goes for both the ‘sender’, the ‘message’ and the ‘receiver’ boxes. In the ‘sender’ institutions, one interprets the world or a particular segment of it on the basis of general values and ideologies in society, as well as norms and ideas that are specific to such institutions. The text or message will include meanings that more or less unwittingly get there through the complex process of production. At the receiving or ‘reception’ end, a similarly complex production of meaning through interpretation takes place, also involving unconscious elements.

This means that everything becomes more complex and hard to get a grasp on methodologically. It also, importantly, means that it is impossible for any of us to regard the field of media and communication as outsiders, as a chemist regards a process she is not involved in. It moreover means that a *holistic* perspective, one that in principle has the whole of the communication process in view, is absolutely necessary. Both with ‘senders’ and ‘recipients’, processes of meaning-making go on, on the basis of a historically produced reservoir of signs, codes and forms of understanding, contained, so to speak, in verbal language and its genres, in visual traditions, forms of presentation, and so on.

One can also suggest some critical perspectives that may result from a hermeneutic way of thinking in media studies. A first example could be hermeneutics’ potential for a *critique of science* (where ‘science’ would also include humanistic scholarship). This is best understood with reference to the historical struggles within the field. In the chapter on influence (Chapter 2) I referred to the American sociologist Robert K. Merton’s characterization of two main traditions within the field by way of two mottoes. One of these, a predominantly American, ‘positivist’ or ‘empiricist’ tradition, operated, in Merton’s view, according to the motto ‘We don’t know if what we say is particularly important, but it is at least true’. The other, a predominantly European, philosophically inflected tradition, operated in accordance with the motto ‘We don’t know whether what we say is true, but it is at least important’. What we did not discuss in Chapter 2 was precisely Merton’s notion of *truth* here. The positivist or empiricist way of thinking tends to reserve the notion of scientific truth to that which can be empirically confirmed by way of procedures that produce quantitative, statistical representations of reality. This has two problematic consequences.

First, one might end up measuring something other than that which one intended to study by way of these preferred methods. This concerns the problem of *operationalization* of the theoretical notions one necessarily starts out with when formulating the question to which one seeks an answer. Theoretical notions tend to be of a qualitative nature. Such problems are, of course, well known, and there are established ways in which to handle them. To hermeneutically oriented researchers, however, operationalizations will appear much more difficult. There will always be a drastic leap from qualitative, theoretical thinking about the complex reality that we have to understand by way of language, to quantitative representations of it in figures, even if hermeneutically inclined researchers also make use of quantitative methods.

The other problem is this: if the notion of truth is limited to 'findings' derived from that which it is possible to investigate by way of (ever more refined) quantitative methods, this will also limit the sorts of questions scholars may legitimately work on. The areas of research will be limited to the questions that can be answered by way of the methods that are officially recognized as 'scientific'. Method comes to define the issues worth studying. One may thus end up answering questions few see any reason to care about, while fundamental, perhaps less 'operationalizable', issues are left alone. A hermeneutic sort of approach is more free in its choice of problems to investigate, since the criteria of validity or truth are different here. An absolutely objective understanding is, in principle, impossible since the interpreting subject is always inscribed in historically, socially and culturally specific contexts. So in a hermeneutic approach, what is true or valid knowledge is decided through a continuous dialogue, where the 'pre-scientific' – moral, ideological – preconditions for understanding the phenomena in question can be discussed. As mentioned above, the ideal of empiricist or positivist research has been to 'eliminate' the influence of such preconditions methodically – rather than to acknowledge them and include them in the research process and the presentation of its results.

But hermeneutic ideas not only inspire a critique of science; they can also inspire critical social theory more generally and, in that way, form a basis for, say, media research. The most central name here is Jürgen Habermas, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, Germany. A main subject for him, which he has dealt with in various writings over more than 20 years, is the relationship between two types of rationality, two ways of thinking with different criteria for truth or validity that imply different relations between people. The following is a brief, simplified presentation of some of the main points that are central in particular to his *Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 1984 and 1989).

One form of rationality is the *technical-economical*. This rationality has an

ng other than that which one methods. This concerns the notions one necessarily starts with which one seeks an answer to. Such problems are, of course, of various kinds, and in various ways in which to handle them. However, operationalizations will always be a drastic leap from the complex reality that we have to representations of it in figures. We also make use of quantitative

truth is limited to 'findings' to investigate by way of (ever more) to limit the sorts of questions research will be limited to the methods that are officially fine the issues worth studying. 'see any reason to care about', 'zable', issues are left alone. In its choice of problems to truth are different here. At the principle, impossible since the orically, socially and culturally roach, what is true or valid is dialogue, where the 'pre-ions for understanding' the mentioned above, the ideal of iminate' the influence of such knowledge them and include on of its results.

tique of science; they can also l, in that way, form a basis for e here is Jürgen Habermas, Frankfurt, Germany. A main ous writings over more than 20 : of rationality, two ways of validity that imply different ief, simplified presentation of a particular to his *Theory of omical*. This rationality has

absolute criterion of truth such as that of the natural sciences and school mathematics: A proposition is either true or false, and it should be as exact as possible. This is evidently the sort of rationality that is useful when constructing aeroplanes or power plants; but questions concerning meaning, ethics etc. are, in principle, impossible to answer in a satisfactory way within this rationality. A technical-economical form of rationality orients one towards the measurable efficiency of this or that plan or action. Terms such as *goal-oriented rationality* or *instrumental rationality* are also used about this type of thinking, and in political discussions one often speaks of *economic rationalism*, referring to the twin ideas that market mechanisms are preferable to government intervention, and that government should take economic considerations as the totally dominating criterion when making decisions about policy. The social consequences of the dominance of technical-economical rationality are many. They will, for instance, imply that it is difficult to find acceptance for an argument on political matters that cannot immediately be supported by 'exact figures', which demonstrate the technical and economic efficiency of a certain policy. It is not enough to say that polluted air is detrimental to people's health and that it should therefore be cleaned; one needs rather to calculate that a 50 per cent reduction in air pollution will save £x million in reduced sick leave, hospital costs etc.

The British educational system is in the process of a transformation from elementary to university level, where technical-economical rationality totally dominates the language in which education (and research) is understood and the ways in which goals are set for this sector of society. The standard of education is presumed to be measurable through identical national tests; teachers and schools are to receive resources according to how they fulfil goals of the sort previously encountered in the manufacture of goods such as cars and electrical appliances; the quality of research is measured in terms of the number of books published, and so on. In summer 2000 it was revealed (in the *Guardian*) that this may lead to teachers filling in tests for their students in order to comply with the required standards of 'productivity', and British university researchers speak of how they need to rush the publication of a book before the end of the year, even if this reduces its quality, simply because their department will otherwise risk suffering budget cuts. These examples show not only how this form of rationality privileges 'exact figures' as a particularly effective form of *rhetoric* (see the following chapter), they also indicate how there may be a counter-productive mismatch between this rationality, and the social and cultural areas it is allowed to 'take over'.

Habermas labels the other form of rationality *communicative*. He could possibly also have called it *hermeneutic*. Habermas argues that this sort of rationality is to be found, for example, in people's everyday lives, and in various more or less popular organizations and movements, primarily those

formed around issues such as ecology, feminism, and so on. The criterion for truth or validity is here, one could say, closely tied to ethics, and *dialogue* is the 'medium' of this form of rationality. While the technical-economical rationality tends to be authoritarian in the sense that its notion of truth is absolute, objective, indisputable, communicative rationality is in principle open and democratic since truth is decided through ongoing discussion. Habermas argues that there is an orientation towards mutual understanding and the establishment of some form of consensus inherent in human communication or 'communicative action', and so the nature of human communication (as dialogue) can provide a normative foundation for social critique. He suggests that each of the two forms of rationality dominate in one of two different social spheres, termed *system world* and *life world* respectively. However, the system world is expanding, colonizing areas that traditionally belonged to the life world. This expansion is, though, met with resistance, for instance from more or less spontaneously formed popular movements such as those mentioned above.

All of this should illustrate how the languages, procedures and understandings of science and scholarship are not necessarily totally 'innocent' or neutral in themselves. They can be tied to different sorts of rationality, different notions of truth and various general, basic social interests.

Finally, it may be worthwhile pointing out how hermeneutics also can provide a basis for what one could call a *critique of education*. Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation, but it is fundamentally a theory of what knowledge is and how it is achieved. It may thus be of importance to how we understand society and how we imagine society *ought to be*; but, bearing in mind the matter in hand, hermeneutics is highly relevant in terms of how we understand university studies – for instance, of media and communication – and what such studies *ought to be like*. One of the central themes of hermeneutics is, precisely, the relationship between the one who interprets, understands and knows, and that which he or she interprets, understands and, after a while, knows something about. The notion of hermeneutical self-reflection actually points to the necessity of forming a *relatively independent, personal understanding* of whatever one studies. From what one reads and hears as a student, one must form one's own thoughts and opinions, on the basis of one's own situation and interests. When really learning as a student, one not only forms a personal conception of a particular academic field or subject, one also, at the same time, changes oneself. It was put like this by the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault:

... knowledge is a spiritual adventure and a spiritual transformation. The one who knows is not only different from the one who does not know by the

simple fac
is no long
very subje

These are tl
development
advanced forr
To study is to
and one's own
and take up sc
field for the de

l so on. The criterion for ethics, and *dialogue* is the technical-economical at its notion of truth is rationality is in principle igh ongoing discussion. ls mutual understanding us inherent in human o the nature of human ive foundation for social tionality dominate in one nd *life world* respectively. g areas that traditionally t, met with resistance, for pular movements such as

uages, procedures and not necessarily totally tied to different sorts of us general, basic social

w hermeneutics also can *ducation*. Hermeneutics is theory of what knowledge ice to how we understand but, bearing in mind the it in terms of how we dia and communication – of the central themes of n the one who interprets, terprets, understands and, on of hermeneutical self- ing a *relatively independent*, from what one reads and ghts and opinions, on the eally learning as a student, rticular academic field or . It was put like this by the

ual transformation. The ho does not know by the

simple fact that he knows about certain things, but by the fact that he or she is no longer the same. In other words: knowledge is that which changes the very subjectivity of the one who knows.

(Foucault, 1979: 7)

These are thoughts one might well call hermeneutical. They tie education to development of self or personality. They make studies and research – an advanced form of education – into personally, existentially relevant activities. To study is to orientate oneself in the world in order to understand oneself and one's own position in various contexts. Since the media are so important and take up so much time in our everyday lives, media studies is an excellent field for the development of such improved self-understanding.